

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-09

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FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2434

C O N F I D E N T I A L CAIRO 2216

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR EG

SUBJECT: CBS REPORT ON STRANDED SHIPS IN SUEZ CANAL

REF: STATE 042260

1. HAVE NOT HEARD REFERENCE REPORT, BUT ITS THRUST STRIKES US AS AT LEAST PARTIALLY ACCURATE. REFERRING TO STRANDED VESSELS IN GREAT BITTER LAKE, SCA CHAIRMAN MASHOUR VOLUNTEERED TO AMBASSADOR A FEW DAYS AGO THAT (A) HE IS INTENSIFYING RESIDUAL WORK ON CANAL CLEARANCE IN HOPES OF HAVING IT TECHNICALLY READY FOR REOPENING SOMETIME IN APRIL AND (B) HE EXPECTS AT THAT TIME TO BE ABLE TO PERMIT STRANDED VESSELS TO DEPART. FINAL DECISION ON FORMAL REOPENING WILL, OF COURSE, BE A POLITICAL ONE. GOE HAS FREQUENTLY ASSERTED ITS OBLIGATION UNDER 1888 CONSTANTINOPLE CONVENTION TO SAFEGUARD SECURITY OF CANAL REQUIRES A FURTHER ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL BEFORE REOPENING CAN TAKE PLACE.

2. SCA PERSONNEL CONTINUE TO BE ENGAGED IN CLEARING DEBRIS AND UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE IN CANAL. USS ESCAPE IS LENDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE UPON REQUEST. SCA IS ALSO ANXIOUS ARRANGE FOR REMOVAL OF SIZEABLE BRIDGE ABUTMENTS AT KILOMETER 64 AND 68. ADDITIONALLY, MASHOUR IS NOT FULLY SATISFIED THAT RECENTLY COMPLETED MINE
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CLEARANCE OPERATION WAS ENOUGH AND HAS ASKED THE BRITISH

AND THE FRENCH TO DEPLOY MINE HUNTERS TO MAKE TWO OR THREE MORE MINE CLEARANCE SWEEPS BEFORE CANAL IS REOPENED. INSURANCE CONSIDERATIONS PROMPT HIS CONCERN. BRITS AND FRENCH ARE NOW CONSIDERING RESPONSES. SCA IS ALSO AWAITING DELIVERY OF LIGHTING EQUIPMENT FROM US MANUFACTURER TO REPLACE TOTALLY DESTROYED LIGHTS ON CANAL BANKS AND THEREBY PERMIT 24 HOUR USAGE.

3. ABOVE OPERATIONS NOTWITHSTANDING, A NUMBER OF EGYPTIAN FLAG VESSELS HAVE TRANSITTED THE CANAL. MOST WERE SMALL, BUT ONE T-2 TYPE TANKER, BADR, OF PERHAPS 20,000 TONS, DRAWING ABOUT 20 1/2 FEET, WENT THROUGH. THESE TRANSITS HAVE NOT BEEN PUBLICIZED. WHEN ASKED ABOUT BADR. SCA CLAIMED HER TRANSIT WAS A TRIAL RUN.

4. WE DO NOT KNOW DRAFTS OF VARIOUS VESSELS STRANDED IN GREAT BITTER LAKE. ONE AT LEAST IS KNOWN STILL TO BE FULLY LOADED. OFF-LOADING AND IN BALLAST, AND WITH PRUDENCE AND CARE, IT SHOULD TECHNICALLY BE POSSIBLE FOR AT LEAST SOME OF THE STRANDED VESSELS TO STEAM OR BE TOWED OUT. GOE VIEW IS THAT DECISION AS TO WHEN TO CLEAR THESE VESSELS FOR DEPARTURE IS ONE FOR IT TO TAKE IN EXERCISE OF ITS SOVEREIGNTY.

5. OF THE TWO STRANDED AMERICAN VESSELS, I.E. THE AFRICAN GLEN AND THE OBSERVER, THE FIRST IS SUNK IN GREAT BITTER LAKE AND THE SECOND IS IN LAKE TIMSAH, WHERE IT HAS BEEN PARTIALLY UNLOADED. US SALVAGER WHO PURCHASED VESSELS HAS CALLED SEVERAL TIMES IN PAST FEW MONTHS TO ASK FOR INFORMATION AND HAS PROBABLY ALSO DISCUSSED SUBJECT WITHSCA. HE APPARENTLY INTENDS SELL VESSELS FOR SCRAP PURPOSES.

6. DEPT WILL APPRECIATE SUBJECT IS SENSITIVE WITH EGYPTIANS IN ARAB-ISRAELI NEGOTIATING CONTEXT AND ABOVE INFORMATION SHOULD USED WITH CARE.
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